



# Applying The Buddha's Teaching In Daily Life

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What draws me to the Buddha's teaching is that it is pragmatic, relatively straightforward to understand yet profound in its implications. Before I elaborate more about how is the Buddha's Dhamma relevant to daily life, I think it is necessary to let me explain a little about what I do not consider Dhamma to be. Dhamma is not meant to be the substance of philosophical debates with endless postulations and hypothesis. It is not an intellectual exercise for the very intelligent to showcase their scholastic prowess. It is neither esoteric nor is it meant to be a mystical revelation of the world after death.

Buddha's Dhamma is pragmatic. This means it contains solution that solves life's problems. When we embrace Dhamma and practise it judiciously, life will become better, happier, more fulfilling and more meaningful. The positive effects could be felt by anyone who makes the effort and who practises the correct Dhamma. And the returns are felt in this

very life: there is no need to wait for after death to cash in.

## Rebalancing priorities

The first principle of Dhamma is that in many aspects of life, we experience all kinds of mental stress and dis-ease (dukkha) because we have relentless and insatiable wants (tanha). (Depending on how intense those 'wants' are, you may substitute the word with 'preferences', 'desires', 'cravings' or 'obsessions'.) If we can just see this dukkha-tanha correlation, and understand it intuitively, this insight should serve as a powerful wake-up call. There should be a fundamental shift in our worldview and priorities. In the past, we believe that we will be happy when we successfully achieve our goals. And we happily and determinedly set goals after goals so that we remain 'happy'. Now, we realise that it is the constant setting of those goals that is making us so unhappy and



driving us crazy. We may realise that when we have achieved our goals, that temporary sense of gratification is going to fuel more desires, more goals and thus generate more stress, most discontent and more 'dukkha'. This is what is meant by samsara or the rounds of 'rebirths', again and again.

For a lay person, it is quite impossible to lead his life with no goals and no desires. However, that does not mean that he will never find some measure of relief from the dukkha-tanha equation. He just has to realise that there is a trade-off he has to make: if he can let go of some desires, he will experience less dukkha. Conversely, the more demands and preferences he has, the more dukkha he will experience. He must thus learn to make choices and decide what is worth pursuing and what should be quietly let go of so that he can still have some peace of mind even as he achieves the things that truly matter.

## Values and Conduct

An important step in applying Dhamma in daily life would be to develop within oneself strong moral values to guide thought, action and speech. Why is this important? Because we need firm moral compass to help tame very strong negative instincts of greed and ill-will within us. If those twin negative forces are allowed to proliferate unchecked, our mind cannot attain the equilibrium of peace and calm.

For the lay person, at the very least we should observe the five (5) basic moral precepts. Let me explain a little about how the precepts should be upheld:

a) Abstaining from killing – Not taking life, sparing life, is the very least that a student of Dhamma can do. In my mind however, it goes beyond that. It is also about respecting life, valuing it and honouring it. A practising Buddhist should not even abuse another being in word or action (ideally in thought also but it may be a bit difficult sometime to control thoughts especially in the heat of the moment). He should develop empathy for another. This means having compassion and friendliness-kindliness, which are essentially two of the four states of being that the Buddha called noble (the remaining two are being empathetically happy and having equanimity).

b) Abstaining from 'taking what has not been given' – This second precept is often shortened in English to read "not stealing". This is technically not quite right. The precept actually means we do not take anything as long as it has not been given to us. If we are strict about observing this precept, we should not even be picking up stray money from the road

(no such thing as 'finders, keepers') or even something as seemingly trivial as using office stationery for personal purpose. Ultimately this precept is about containing our greedy instincts and letting go of craving. So beyond merely not stealing, we should endeavour to give, to share, and to be generous (dana) and open-hearted.

c) Abstaining from sexual misconduct – Explaining this precept is a little tricky. While Buddha praised celibacy for the serious practitioner, he was not a prude and did not condemn sex for the lay disciples. At its most basic level, this third precept is about not forcing one's sexual desires on the vulnerable, the innocent, the unwilling, and the taken. So, rape in any form is wrong. Sex with one incapable of saying no is wrong. Sex with a minor is wrong. Illicit sex with one who is married or even engaged or promised to another is wrong.

At another level, this precept is about not abusing trust, not breaking promises, cheating and undermining another's self-worth. For many of us, being in love and being loved is a life-transforming experience. It is one of life's most profound self-acclamation events. The knowledge that one had been cheated or taken advantage of in so base a manner will be absolutely devastating. It is an emotional tsunami that some may not even be able to recover from and may even be driven to suicide. So this precept is not just about restraining wrong sexual indulgences but also about respecting another.

However, in an ideal relationship, carnal pleasure is only a small part of the equation. For a relationship to be sustainable for a lifetime, the head and the heart must also be in the picture: that would mean being intellectually engaged with each other and being spiritually compatible.

d) Abstaining from telling lies – This fourth precept goes beyond just avoiding speaking falsehood. It requires one to be very clear in one's mind what is factual and accurate, and what is not. One should know when the mind is making up excuses, constructing stories, or straying into the fuzzy world of half-truths. When one observes this precept strictly, one has absolute clarity in the mind when it is being completely objective. When the mind has this cognitive ability to know when it is aware and objective, it has the condition to be able to see "reality as it really is", meaning the mind can begin to understand how it works.

e) Abstaining from intoxicants – Finally, this fifth precept is about avoiding consuming any substances that weakens the mind's capacity to function clearly and optimally. Often the



temptation to indulge in mind-altering or suppressing substances is because of a desire to bury some mental pain or emotional angst. Unfortunately such measure is only a temporary respite (when the drunkard or addict is unconscious or dulled) and does not solve anything. Pain buried, suppressed or ignored does not recede: instead it can give birth to even more emotional problems. The Buddha's methodology for eradicating dukkha is far more effective but it requires the mind to be sharp, alert and focused. The sufferer must recognise his situation and have the courage, the mental resolve, the faith and conviction and the discipline to press on and watch his mind and not hide from it.

## Implications for Relationships

Relationships are a very critical aspect of a lay person's life. If there is anything keeping you awake at night, it is probably the worry over kids, a spouse, a special loved one, parents, friends, bosses, etc. When we embrace Dhamma and make it a part of daily life, inevitably, the impact would be felt in relationships. A sincere practitioner of Dhamma must be ever conscientious and vigilant in taming the twin-negative instincts of greed and ill-will. This would mean that he is likely to be more open-handed in relationship and more considerate, as opposed to just taking, being demanding and having all kinds of expectations of others.

If he upholds his precepts, then in his relationships he would not harm another in any way. He would cherish and love, be trustworthy and upright, and be responsible and caring. He will be a wise counsel for people around him because he seems so much more considered, reflective, broad-minded and objective. The better a practitioner he is, the more he would live the 'noble' life. This means being deeply compassionate, being truly friendly and kind, having sincere empathy for another and be able to rejoice in his good fortune and above all, having a calm and unruffled attitude towards life's ups and downs.

## Implications for Life and Living

In a beautiful poem called *Leisure* by W. H. Davies, the opening line reads, "What is this life if full of care, we have no time to stand and stare?" This is so true of many a lay life. For his life is ever disappearing in the blink of an eye because

he is so rushed, so caught up, and so distracted. He is often so busy either planning for the future or reminiscing about the past, that he has lost each passing moment because that 'present' was not registered.

If we truly practise Dhamma, we will be setting aside time each day to be more mindful of life's happenings and mind's activities. We will be mindful of the arising of pain or pleasure when sense objects hit sense bases, and of the tapering away of those sensations eventually as they inevitably would. Life does not disappear: it is experienced and understood because the mind is ever present, ever aware. As awareness for the moment deepens, the mind calms down and quietly enjoys each experience without being attached. There is just the watching of the arising and passing away of the moment, a process where there is nothing to be attached to. Yet, there is no wasted life because each moment of life is registered and lived.

As far as possible, time should also be set aside for concentration meditation each day. This practice is necessary to help the mind sharpen its ability to stay focused, alert, energised, and clear. Such a mind is also likely to be happier, more peaceful and sharper. All these are helpful conditions for spiritual awakening.

When we have successfully weaved Dhamma into daily life, we will experience mental balance and happiness. However, even as we enjoy life, we may also develop mindfulness of death. After all, if we are ever aware of each moment arising and passing away, isn't it inevitable that we would also become mindful of the impermanence of life and the inevitability of death?

This is not a bad thing because for those with such clarity of the nature of life and death, they would be mindful of passing time and the urgency for spiritual practice. Too many in the world bury their collective heads in the proverbial sand and pretend that they have forever to do whatever they think is important. And what do they do? They procrastinate, they dither, they detour, and they generally waste time. A true practitioner having anticipated that time will run out is not going to make that mistake. He will do what must be done for spiritual development and then when death knocks, he will move on gracefully and with no regrets. His would be a life properly and meaningfully lived.

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